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ABSTRACT

A study of three Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) traced development of the skills element of their RES [Regional Economic Strategy] and their progress toward an action plan for skills to implement their strategic objectives. The process involved creating a forum on skills; producing a consultation draft skills strategy; and producing a final strategy for skills. Each RDA inherited work and people from predecessor organizations, with existing partnerships of varying strength and effectiveness. Region 1 inherited a network of all appropriate regional partners and an almost completed assemblage and interpretation of regional skills data. Region 2 had not advanced as far, but had conducted a labor market survey and begun to process data and draft the strategy. Region 3 was ahead in general skills and labor market data but had not developed a robust regional skills network. In the next phase, RDA 1 worked with the pre-existing regional skills task group to establish general priorities for the draft strategy. RDA 2 established its own new consultation on priorities. RDA 3 established a group on skills and knowledge in conjunction with regional interests and prepared a draft skills strategy. The RDAs published consultation draft strategies, then engaged in a further consultation exercise. Work continued on skills action plans. The initial position of most partners in relation to the skills responsibilities of the RDAs was one of slightly skeptical good will. (YLB)

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A report on a small-scale research project

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The first phase of the Regional Development Agencies' skills work: a report for participants on a small-scale research project

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Introduction

This is a report on a study undertaken by the author, working with three RDAs, tracing the development of the skills element of their RES and of their progress towards an action plan for skills, which would implement their strategic objectives. The meetings and discussions took place from April to November 1999, i.e. from the beginning of the RDAs' legal existence until just after the first RES had to be submitted to ministers. It is recognised that the speed of development is considerable, and that in all areas changes have taken place since the completion of this investigation. Some of the issues raised in this report will still be working themselves out in reality, and it is hoped that an outside perspective may be of some assistance in this further process.

I am grateful to colleagues in the RDAs, to regional partners in those areas and to other respondents outside the three RDAs studied for their willingness to participate during a very busy period. In order to preserve the confidentiality promised to respondents in relation to their individual contributions, these have been generalised and anonymised so far as possible, given that much contextual information is already in the public domain. The RDAs will be designated in the report as α, β and γ, since there are already so many Roman letters in use as abbreviations.

It is too early to assess the impact of RDAs and their strategies on skills in their regions. It is possible, however, to examine the approaches

adopted, to gain a picture of the factors at work in and across regions and to make some prognoses about how these may affect future action and progress.

The information to support the views expressed in the report is drawn from fifteen interviews with RDA staff and representatives of regional partner organisations in the three regions, from the draft and final strategy documents of all eight RDAs, as well as from the sources referenced.

The core process

In outline the process adopted by the three RDAs in the study was similar, as specified by the DETR (DETR 1999a, DETR 1999b). Each of the three

- created some sort of forum on skills, involving a range of regional partners,
- produced a consultation draft skills strategy that was circulated widely,
- received submissions on the basis of the draft, and
- produced a final strategy for skills, incorporated in the wider RES, which was presented to ministers.

The detail of this process differed significantly between regions, as did, very importantly, the context.

The initial position

Each RDA inherited work and people from predecessor organisations, together with a range of existing partnerships of varying strength and effectiveness. By the time the RDAs came formally into existence some of these pre-existing organisations had networks had been able to

commence work towards the strategic planning required of the RDAs. The extent to which this happened, and, where it happened, the extent to which the earlier activity, organisations and personnel moved seamlessly into the new RDA, differed substantially between regions. This difference appears to have had a significant influence on the way in this the RDA has itself tackled its skills responsibilities. Certainly in this first phase of the RDAs' development it is important to take account of this context, though its importance may reduce over time, if there is a convergence of approach across the country as a whole.

In one region a skills network, involving all the main regional players in relation to skills, had been in existence for about a year. By the autumn of 1998, in the knowledge of what would be required of RDA α, it had been in a position to commission a major skills survey which could feed into the development of a regional skills strategy. On its official creation six months later the RDA therefore inherited not only a network of all the appropriate regional partners, who had already been speaking with each other, but also an almost completed assemblage and interpretation of regional skills data. One which, moreover, had been prepared with the RDA's needs specifically in mind, formed in part by people who would become RDA officials, members and stakeholders, and owned by those partners, rather than appearing as a creature of the new organisation.

A second region had not advanced as far as this before the emergence of RDA β. It had, though, been able to commission some substantial work – a labour market survey, for instance – and was able to draw widely on secondees from partners to help process the data and build it into the drafting of the strategy.

Both these RDAs were in position, almost from day one, to employ survey data which was

- up-to-date,
- sourced from outside both RDA and regional stakeholders, and thus perceived as unbiased,
- commissioned, and therefore owned, by key regional partners.

The RDA γ was not without data, as there had been a good deal of work in the region on skills – indeed it was arguably somewhat ahead of most other regions in producing general skills and labour market information. However, it had not progressed as far as the other two regions in this study when it came to specific preparation for the RDA, nor had it developed a robust regional skills network. In consequence, for information of a sufficiently detailed nature to support the production of a full skills strategy, the RDA was largely dependent on that produced by one set of key partners. Without the prior existence of a wider forum to debate and agree these issues, there was a danger that the RDA's use of one partner's data would be perceived by others as indicative of a degree of bias. To some extent, at least, this does appear to have happened. Furthermore, the lack of an early and evidently independent survey seems to have had the effect of slowing the whole process down – delaying analysis, sharing, the establishment of new networks, and the achievement of a common strategy.

Progress towards the draft strategy

In RDA α the earlier work by consultants on the skills survey meant that many partner representatives had already had the opportunity to participate in workshops and influence the scope and format of the report. In the next phase the RDA could work with the pre-existing regional skills task group to establish agreed general priorities for the

draft strategy. As these discussions went on, the RDA circulated a very general statement of principles for comment, which would inform the composition and shape of the draft RES.

RDA β was not in a position to move ahead in quite the same way. Instead it had to establish its own new consultation on priorities. This was introduced early in the strategy process, so as to inform, rather than comment on, the formulation of a regional strategy. The RDA established a skills forum, chaired by a Board member, with employers forming a majority of the members, who were widely drawn from among regional partners. The forum met three times, always with a short, focused agenda and a workshop, issues-based approach before the formulation of the skills section of the draft RES.

Within the wider RES process RDA β set up some 32 sector groups (one of them for the education and training sector) and ran 16 public panel days at which partners gave evidence. One panel day was devoted to skills, and representatives of education and training providers, employers and employer organisations, the Employment Service and careers services all contributed. The sector groups and the panel days, as well as the skills forum, provided opportunities for representation, in addition to written comments, solicited about priorities in advance of the formal consultation on a draft document.

The approach of RDA γ was somewhat different again. The RDA also established a broad representative group on "skills and knowledge" in conjunction with many regional interests, which met once before the preparation of a first draft skills strategy. This was presented to the RDA Board and then used as the basis for the skills section in the RDA's draft RES. The first draft then underwent seven sub-regional consultation meetings before going into its formal public consultation phase.

Consultation and the final strategy

In common with all RDAs the three in this study published consultation draft strategies at the end of June 1999. Practice varied nationally. All RES drafts included at least some reference to skills. In addition some RDAs published separate draft skills strategies and two published draft action plans for skills. Of the study RDAs, γ published its approach to skills within a general draft RES; β published a RES and a skills strategy; and α published consultation drafts of the RES, the skills strategy and the skills action plan.

Following the publication of the drafts each RDA engaged in a further consultation exercise. Partly this depended upon written responses to the hardcopy or web based document, but there were also efforts to engage partners in a face to face dialogue. In the case of RDA β this occurred primarily through the agency of the skills forum, which continued to meet and to communicate messages between the RDA and the respective partner constituencies. RDA α organised a series of day conferences with partner groups, at which members of those groups had the opportunity to hear presentations from the agency and to discuss at some length the content and approach of the drafts, which had been circulated in advance. For this stage of the process the third RDA, γ, relied largely upon the formal responses made. It also developed an interim document, drawing key principles and a lengthy list of action points from the skills aspect of the draft strategy. This RDA γ circulated to members of its skills forum, with the request that they indicate whether or not they accepted the validity of these points, whether they (or their sector) would lead on implementation, and the ranking they would assign to each action in the list. The responses were used to identify the initial actions, included as an element in the final

strategy document. As with all RDAs, the opportunities for informal soundings of opinion were also important and valuable.

From the responses through these various approaches to consultation the respective RDAs worked on the documents which have subsequently gone to ministers for government approval and been published.

The skills action plan

Each RDA had to produce a strategy. Work on an action plan for skills was also a requirement (DETR 1999b), but, in general, RDAs have decided to take as long as they can to produce the action plan which will realise the aspirations of the strategy. The importance of involving regional partners fully, so that they are, as organisations, individually and collectively committed to the action points identified in the plan, is seen universally as of central importance. It is better to deliver the plan late, but with partners signed up to take responsibility for delivering specific outcomes, than to present a plan which may subsequently be disowned by one or more partners, or where partners are prepared to nod approval, but not to bestir themselves to convert the words into deeds.

In consequence, even after submitting the strategy to central government, work has continued on the action plans.

RDA γ is routing its further development work on the action plan primarily through its skills forum. Working from the action points in the strategy document officers are preparing a set of proposals for taking these forward, which they will circulate to key contacts among regional partners, inviting responses. These will then be considered by

the skills forum and worked into an agreed document for submission to central government.

In RDA β the central process is now a series of meetings with regional partners to agree those specific actions on which each partner will lead development. Sometimes the RDA may itself act as leader, but more often it will be a co-ordinator, liaising with lead agencies in order to ensure progress is taking place.

Unlike the other RDAs in this study, α has already produced its action plan, built upon its consultation draft in the light of responses. The process has now moved on to a series of meetings. These comprise open meetings on the main stands of the action plan and bilateral meetings with regional partners. In the meetings with partners the objective is to move from their expressions of support and interest in participating, made during the consultation, and which informed the action plan, towards specific commitments to lead on the implementation of relevant actions.

Perceptions of partners

Regional partners are diverse and do not necessarily share perceptions – even within a sector, still less across sectors, where there may often be real competitive tensions. Interviews with partners from provider and employer backgrounds, and across the three regions, have elicited both common and divergent views.

Issues fall principally into two groups at this stage: how partners felt about the consultation as it progressed, and how they felt the final documents reflected their input and priorities.

The timescale of the entire process, from the emergence of the RDAs on day one in April, through the initial consultations and draft proposal, to the submission of final RES to central government at the end of October 1999 was extremely truncated. This was not the doing of the RDAs themselves, but ran in accordance with a government-set timetable. Nevertheless, there was a definite tendency for partners to complain about the lack of opportunity to contribute fully (particularly the difficulty of themselves consulting fully with their constituencies), given the constraints of the process. Intellectually, all partners were well aware of the external factors involved, but the reality of a process of this type is that a degree of resentment attaches to the person or organisation who is directly forcing the pace, and this appeared to be rather the case in this instance.

Linked with this was a suspicion on the part of some partners that the process was more confirmation than consultation, and that RDAs had a clear strategy in mind from the start, which they were intent upon pushing through.

This, in turn, was reinforced in the minds of some partners when the process offered relatively limited opportunities to state a public case (particularly in RDA γ). The more extensive the public consultation, the happier partners seemed to be.

The theme of openness here is continued with regard to the data used to inform the development of the skills strategy. With an early start to the process, pre-dating the formal creation of the RDA, but fully linked into its shadow stage, RDA α and, to a lesser extent, RDA β, could engage partners extensively in the initial design and establishment of a data project, and could employ independent consultants to undertake this task. γ, on the other hand, had a much more limited

shadow existence, and its work largely started in April 1999. It was unable to commission a skills survey of its own and depended substantially on data provided by the region's Training and Enterprise Councils. In a sensitive environment the importance of the TECs' information in informing the strategy has undoubtedly engendered at least some suspicion among other regional partners, especially in the education sector.

All partners, in all regions, were united in stressing the importance of full, reliable and comparable LMI to underpin both the initial strategy and its further development. Even in those areas where there had been the opportunity to produce surveys tailored to the immediate need, it was appreciated that this was less than complete and not necessarily sufficiently aligned with the LMI used in neighbouring regions or nationally.

Whilst extensive public consultations certainly helped RDAs to establish good relations with their partners they did not entirely resolve all concerns. Whereas education partners were more likely to express worries about – in effect – secret deals being done, some employer representatives felt disadvantaged by an open format, which might be seen to favour those more accustomed to having to present cases in this way – in other words, the education representatives.

From draft to final document there were changes in all three regions. On the whole partners seemed to view these as useful and representing a refinement of the document in the light of further consultations. In one region, however, there was a clear difference between the views of employers, who saw a much improved strategy, and the further education sector, which saw a strategy which had had its teeth drawn. Unsurprisingly, the representatives interviewed also had

diametrically opposed opinions about how influential their voices had been in the second stage.

Round-up and general prognosis

The processes adopted in each of the three regions studied result from a combination of historical factors and decisions taken by the respective RDAs. The report has set out to look principally at process, rather than content, on the basis that the precise skill areas for the regions will emerge through a longer dialogue between RDAs and partners, and through experimental practice, beyond the scope of the initial investigation. The first few months of the RDAs will, however, have a lasting effect – of indeterminate length, but more than just short term – on the way in which skills are identified and action is taken to support and develop them in each region. This is not least because of the feelings engendered by the process in regional partners.

Given the central importance of partnership in arriving at a coherent skills strategy and devising and implementing an appropriate action plan to realise its priorities, it is hardly surprising if the roles, sensitivities and perceptions of regional partners loom large. It is clear from the present study that the articulation of effort between RDAs and regional partners is better defined in some areas than others. Relationships have been closer historically in some areas than others, and the formative period of the skills strategy appears to have been correspondingly more harmonious and more productive in those areas. The approach taken by RDAs has had an effect, however – we are not here looking at a scene of historical determinism, whereby all new developments are merely derivations of what has gone before. Where RDAs have taken an open approach this appears to have been welcomed by partners, and its outcomes have been more willingly accepted as

reasonable, even when the detail has not corresponded to partners' own preferences. It has, of course, been easier for this approach to proceed where prior good working relationships were already in place.

The issue of LMI has come through universally as critical. Less often (though sometimes) expressed was a particular aspect of this – inter-regional skill requirements. This may relate to relatively local matters – where an industry simply straddles the borders of two RDAs, for example, or where a supply chain extends from one region into a neighbouring one. It also relates to widely scattered or generally prevalent industries and their needs, and to the important concern of ensuring the skills for new industrial development should be available in regions which currently specialise in other sectors. These are all of concern to individual regions and RDAs, but also to the national economy and the work of the National Skills Task Force.

Thus far the RDAs have worked largely independently, though in communication with each other and in liaison with the DfEE and its Skills Unit. We are now at a point where initial strategies are complete. The strategies have many similarities, which is not surprising, given their level of generality at this stage, and the limited time available for their preparation. With the action plans now being developed, we may expect to see at least initial further divergence. How far this will go, and whether varying regional priorities are compatible with a national agenda for skills, will be critical in the coming months and years.

It is clear that the new RDAs have found some partners better able or more willing to co-operate in the early stages of the skills process than others. This in turn is influenced by the nature of the consultation. The next few months offer RDAs the opening, as they finalise their action plans for skills, to give partners new opportunities to contribute to the

framing of work in the region and to take ownership of the plans. This may mean supporting some partners in finding their way in, as well as demanding their active participation. Again, the success of the RDAs in engaging partners fully will be critical. With the concurrent development of a new system of post-16 education and training, due to come into place on 1 April 2001 (Learning... 1999) this represents a major challenge as well the obvious opportunity. Many respondents, both in RDAs and among partners have indicated the difficulties represented by the simultaneous operation of the two timetables – for the RDAs and for the Learning and Skills Council which will be the central feature of the new post-16 structure. This has been exacerbated by the mixed messages sent by successive developments in government announcements. Even though these may not be incompatible, they have left partners confused. In particular, the relationship between the RDAs, lifelong learning partnerships and the national and local aspects of the Learning & Skills Council have left some respondents unclear about where authority lies and the extent to which it is worth working with each of these bodies.

The initial position of most partners in relation to the skills responsibilities of the RDAs seems to have been one of slightly sceptical good will. Inevitably the process of producing documents has lost some of the good will, though also some of the scepticism, as people have found their own ideas reflected – or not. It is of significance for the continuing work of the RDAs that, whilst their own actions and priorities have clearly had a real impact on the views and attitudes of their partners, external factors, such as the development of government policy, appear to have an equally major effect on partners' perceptions, even of their "own" RDA.

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